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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation Rate Programs Report

February 2018

Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance



SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) PARTICIPATION RATE PROGRAMS REPORT

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OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of the Fiscal Year 2018 state budget requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to report the status of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) client outreach to the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means. The following report is respectfully submitted in response to this requirement.

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION

DTA's mission is to assist and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. DTA offers a comprehensive system of programs and supports to help individuals and families achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, including food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and employment supports.

One in every nine people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, elders, and people with disabilities receive SNAP benefits.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) BACKGROUND AND OPERATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

SNAP is a federally-funded program that provides critical nutritional support to low-income households by helping families and individuals purchase healthy food. DTA administers SNAP on behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the program serves as the first line of defense against hunger in the Commonwealth. One in nine residents of the Commonwealth receives SNAP benefits. In state fiscal year 2017, DTA issued a total of \$1.2B in SNAP benefits.

As of December 2017, DTA's SNAP caseload was 446,640 households consisting of 766,805 recipients. Of these recipients, 151,685 recipients were 60 or over; 270,217 had a disability; and 274,618 were age 18 or under. Of all SNAP households, 72% have a gross countable income of less than 100% of the federal poverty level which equals \$16,240 for a household of two.

RECENT ENHANCEMENTS TO SNAP OUTREACH, ACCESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

DTA is dedicated to ensuring SNAP benefits and related services are available to all eligible Massachusetts households. Outreach to potential new and existing SNAP clients is done through a multi-pronged strategy consisting of DTA employees, sister agencies and contracted vendors. Highlights of on-going and new outreach strategies include the following.

Project Bread / Food Source Hotline: DTA has a long-standing relationship with Project Bread and its Food Source Hotline. The hotline performs SNAP eligibility screenings and provides application assistance. Project Bread also assists needy families seeking resources to address their immediate food needs.

Enhanced Community Based Outreach Partner System: DTA engages with the University of Massachusetts Medical School/Commonwealth Medicine (UMass) to administer a performance-based federal reimbursement project to enhance DTA's provider outreach activities. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2017, UMass contracted with 49 providers ("Outreach Partners") that were responsible for client outreach and application/recertification assistance. As in previous years, preliminary information shows that most Outreach Partners reached their annual application and approval goals. These providers received just over \$600,000 in payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY 2018, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to approximately \$1.2M.

Partnership with Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA): DTA has partnered with EOEA and a working group of advocates to focus on initiatives to help elders access and maximize SNAP benefits. An "unused benefit" pilot was established in March 2017 with EOEA to identify SNAP clients who have not used their card in 60 days. These clients may be at risk for malnutrition, and may need special assistance in order to assess why they are not using their benefits and if other supports are needed. Through a data exchange between DTA and EOEA these clients receive follow up support from an EOEA case manager to assess the barrier to using the card and assist with resolving the issue.

Collaboration with the Massachusetts Council on Aging Association (MCOA): DTA and MCOA's ongoing collaboration has resulted in 14 new Councils on Aging becoming contracted Outreach Partners effective October 2018. This compliments other efforts being employed by DTA to strengthen access to SNAP benefits for seniors.

Efforts to Reduce the "SNAP Gap": DTA and MassHealth continue to prioritize efforts to reduce what is commonly known as the "SNAP Gap" The term SNAP Gap refers to Massachusetts residents who receive MassHealth benefits but who are not currently receiving, but are likely eligible for, SNAP benefits. In January 2018 DTA will begin using contracted Outreach Partners to conduct targeted outreach to potential SNAP Gap clients. Additionally, DTA and MassHealth are in discussions on the development of trainings and a possible reverse referral system.

Improved Access for Massachusetts Seniors: In January 2018 DTA introduced its Senior Assistance Office. This specialized unit was designed to meet the specific needs of the Commonwealth's elder population. Included in this office is a dedicated phone line for elders that will directly connect them with a live case manager. The unit will participate in trainings designed to provide them with additional soft skills and resources to best serve this vulnerable population. To complement these efforts the simplified senior citizen application was revised to improve usability.

Increased Functionality to Mobile Application: In August 2016, DTA introduced a mobile application called DTA Connect that allows clients to access case information, receive alerts and reminders, and update contact information, among other things. At this time, over 211,500 DTA clients have downloaded the app and over 31M transactions have occurred. DTA continues to develop new functionality for its mobile app, including in early 2017 the ability for clients to submit documents via the app.

Enhancements to Online Client Services: In July 2017, DTA assumed control of its services on the Virtual Gateway (VG), a web-based portal that was launched in 2004 and was previously operated by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. The VG is now widely considered outdated. DTA recently began development of client- and provider-friendly online tools and a portal that includes a streamlined eligibility screener, an easy to use SNAP application, and a client and provider portal that applicants and clients can use through a private or public computer. These new web-based services will complement the smart-phone mobile application DTA launched in 2016, and will broaden the portfolio of services that DTA calls “DTA Connect” that allow clients maximum flexibility to needed information and tools 24/7. DTA expects to launch the DTA Connect web portal and online tools in early April 2018. In the near future, DTA will expand DTA Connect web portal services to include the submission of recertification and periodic report forms, neither of which can presently be submitted online.

Collaboration with the Department of Higher Education (DHE): A new partnership has formed between DTA and DHE to address a recent policy change that potentially expands SNAP eligibility for some low-income college students. DTA and DHE have collaborated on a communication strategy designed to inform students of this policy change and assist with the screening and application process.

Engagement with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE): DTA is in the early discussions with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education around formalizing an outreach strategy targeted at engaging families with children who are not currently receiving SNAP and appear to be eligible.

SNAP PATH TO WORK PROGRAM (EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAM)

Since 2006, DTA has partnered with UMass to offer non-TANF SNAP participants meaningful opportunities to enhance employability through SNAP Path to Work program participation. UMass assists DTA by recruiting, subcontracting with and monitoring SNAP Path to Work providers, with the design and production of SNAP Path to Work promotional material and the design and maintenance of snappathtowork.org. UMass also assists SNAP Path to Work providers with claiming partial federal reimbursement for incurred costs associated with providing services to enrolled SNAP recipients. Contracted training providers were reimbursed about \$1.2M for employment and training services provided for services provided in FFY 2017. USDA has approved provider reimbursements of approximately \$4.4M as part of the FFY 2018 SNAP Employment and Training State Plan.

In FFY 2018 52 contracted SNAP Path to Work providers located across the state will help un- and under-employed SNAP participants gain valuable skills and experience, increase employability, secure employment and get on a path to self-sufficiency through engagement in job search assistance, job readiness training, job retention services, certain education opportunities, vocational skills training and apprenticeships.